Bridge Builders
TRANSFORMING CHURCH CULTURE

Church Mediation:

The Challenge Facing the Churches

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CHURCH MEDIATION: AN ECUMENICAL ENGLISH CONFERENCE
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Church Mediation: The Challenge Facing the Churches

Opening presentation by
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Introduction

My first encounter with mediation was a three-day training course that I attended at London Mennonite Centre in February 1994. I can still remember my excitement at discovering that there was a process for working through conflict which could help to address the underlying concerns of people on opposing sides. I knew then that somehow I wanted to work in the field of conflict transformation. We launched Bridge Builders as a service of the London Mennonite Centre nearly two years later, in January 1996.

Why did we start Bridge Builders? As we looked around, we saw a huge need for church leaders to be better equipped to deal with conflict – and no one appearing to serve that need. We saw that mediation was being extensively practised - with disputing neighbours, young offenders and their victims, couples seeking divorce and commercial companies in disputes - but although individual Christians were involved in all these areas, we could not see anyone offering mediation services for the churches, nor any of the churches with its own mediation service. It was very different from North America, where church-based organisations like Mennonite Conciliation Service had led the way in pioneering mediation in both church and society.

Bridge Builders started off very small, with me working one-day a week alongside Nelson Kraybill, the Mennonite Centre's director. We developed two one-day introductory workshops offering training for church leaders in better handling conflict. We started touring these workshops around the country. And we invited Richard Blackburn, a Mennonite trainer and mediator who specialised in working with churches, to come and lead a five-day mediation skills course.

Bridge Builders has grown significantly since those early days. We now have a staff of three, and an office in Durham as well as London. This year alone, we are running five mediation and facilitation skills courses for over 100 church leaders, lay and ordained. One of those courses was tailored specifically for senior church leaders. We have also run a follow-up five-day course on consultancy for church groups. We're leading nine Network Days around the country for the Network of people who have trained with us. And we've taken on three mediation and consultancy cases, a smaller number than usual. This is for several reasons: the volume of training work we've been doing, my personal circumstances with my wife being unwell, and because several of the

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consultancy cases have not come to fruition for various reasons. At the same time, we have referred on at least six other cases to people in our Network.

Last year was our tenth anniversary, and it seemed time to take stock. One way of doing that was by organising a conference to hear what some of the main denominations in England are doing and thinking about the use of mediation in the church. I wanted to see whether the situation has changed since Bridge Builders was launched, and to get a sense for what the future might hold. That's why this conference was organised, and I am delighted that you have joined us today to make the idea a reality, and to be part of the conversation.

In this opening presentation I want to offer three challenges that I believe are facing our churches in England – and no doubt beyond.

Challenge No. 1: Transforming the Church Culture

The first challenge is not directly about mediation. It's about the culture in our churches. How do we deal with conflict generally? The answer, all too often, is not well. At our worst, we stick with the unspoken rule that Christians should be "nice". We fear disagreement and tension over differences. We sweep emerging conflicts under the carpet, avoiding facing into those tensions. We get stuck in entrenched positions. We project our anxieties from elsewhere in life onto changes in the church. Our meetings are poorly led and fail to draw out creativity and wisdom from those participating. We have unrealistic and unclear expectations of our ministers. Too often our ministers lack self-awareness and seem to be missing basic skills in communication and working with groups.

The answer to these problems is not mediation. Let me give you an illustration. In the 1990s the Presbyterian Church in Ireland saw an increase in conflicts being referred to its internal judicial processes. A key element of the Presbyterian response was to establish a denominational mediation service. They carefully thought through and planned how the service would operate, including establishing a group to oversee it. They disseminated information to senior leaders about the benefits of mediation. Then they commissioned Mediation Northern Ireland to train a group of 14 mediators.

However, once the mediators were trained, what happened? The short answer is very little. Very few cases were referred for mediation. And most of the mediators never had a chance to really use their training. The low number of mediation cases wasn't because the number of conflicts had dropped. It was because the prevailing culture of the church had not changed.

Joe Campbell, who trained the mediators and is a Presbyterian lay leader, suggested to me that the following lessons might be learnt:

1) **Education and raising awareness need to precede training a mediation team.** First establish a culture and climate within which

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mediation can operate. This educational task needs to happen at all levels of the church, not just with senior leaders.

2) **A long-term approach is needed**, with a commitment to raising the profile of mediation as a process, and advocating for its use.
3) **Trainers and educators are more widely needed than mediators**. For example, people who can run one-day training workshops and shorter training events.
4) **Only a small number of fully trained mediators are required**, especially in the early phase of development.

In short, Joe was indicating that prevention is better than cure. So how does the culture of the church need to be changed? How can we avoid conflict being experienced only as a destructive force in church life? Here are a just a few suggestions for that long-term work:

1. **We can learn to think differently about conflict**. My assumption is that conflict is normal and to be expected in any group. This is especially true in the church, where we are seeking to build a community that can support one another and serve others, and where we are trying to work out what it means to be reconciled to God and to each other.
2. **We can do more theological reflection on conflict**. Many of the books in the Bible have grown out of situations of conflict, and most of the narratives are tales of conflict. Used appropriately, the Bible can be a wonderful resource as we seek to work creatively with conflict.
3. **We can expect to encounter God in the midst of our conflicts**. Jesus promises that "… where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Jesus is not saying he'll be with us when only two or three have turned up for the prayer or home group meeting. He promises his presence when his followers gather together to engage in loving confrontation, good listening, and seeking agreement in the midst of their tensions and differences.
4. **We can be open and honest about issues around power**. Jesus addressed such issues directly among the early disciples. We need to acknowledge that many conflicts are tied up with gaining or losing power, and address the resulting issues face-on.
5. **We can improve our communication skills, especially our capacity to listen deeply to one another**. We need to be willing to learn and grow in our skills, even as we grow old.
6. **We can learn to understand and explore differences between people**. We struggle to grasp how people are different from one another, too often expecting others to be like us. So finding tools to explore differences in personality and communication style can be a lifeline.
7. **We can learn to understand the emotional dynamics that operate within a church group or congregation**. Church congregations are complex, organic, emotional systems. They have much in common with

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human families. Leaders especially need to draw insights from the social sciences to help us understand these dynamics.

8. **We can learn to hold better meetings and to improve our decision-making processes**. For those chairing meetings this might include welcoming conflict – by which I mean welcoming the open expression of different views – and exploring ways of addressing underlying concerns not just stated demands. And we need to find ways to build consensus and to seek discernment in our decision-making.

I could go on. But I hope it's already clear that these shifts and developments are about building a culture of active peace-making in our churches – in contrast to a culture of shallow niceness. It's a long-term project, requiring a vision for the new culture and sustained work to bring it about.

Challenge No. 2: Promoting and Resourcing Mediation

Before coming to the next challenge, I should explain that I will be using the term "mediation" more loosely than I would normally. When we are training, I generally use mediation to refer to inter-personal work with a small group of individuals. For work with a larger group, such as a congregation, I talk about a group reconciliation or consultancy process. I am here including both under a broad category of "mediation".

So then, the second challenge facing our churches is to promote and resource mediation as one approach for dealing with certain kinds of conflict. That means educating and training people at all levels of the church: developing the skill base of local lay people, of ordained ministers, of denominational workers, and of senior church leaders. And, although we are not doing any skills training today, I am delighted that all these levels are represented at this conference.

Promoting and resourcing mediation also means addressing a range of practical questions:

1) How will suitable people be identified as potential mediators?
2) How will people be trained for their mediation role, and how will that training be funded?
3) How will those who are trained as mediators be mentored and supervised?
4) To whom will the mediators be accountable?
5) How will cases be referred to mediation at different levels?
6) How will the costs of mediation be met, especially if more experienced – and more costly – external help is needed?

An under-girding principle I am working with is that every conflict should be addressed at the lowest level possible, assessed according the degree of intensity and the nature of the issues. This means that, where appropriate (and there are clearly situations where this would not be at all appropriate, such as sexual abuse), the situation is dealt with in the first instance by people in the

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local congregation without drawing in others from outside. Only once the local initiative has failed is further help sought. This approach should mean that conflicts are better contained, and should help ensure that the intervention itself does not promote an unnecessary escalation.

And we need to hold on to the transformation that mediation can bring about. Let me offer one example from my experience. Along with a co-mediator, I worked with the three male leaders of an independent evangelical church and their wives. After the four sessions of mediation, one of the women wrote to me. Here's an extract from what she said:

> "I just wanted to write and say thank you to you for your patience, care and direction. I value you greatly and appreciate so much how you have cut through and focussed the discussion [in our leadership group]. God definitely is using you, and you have brought light into what was a particularly tricky and complicated situation.
>
> From a personal perspective, thank you for going with your "hunch", and inviting the group to pray for me and lay hands on me. I haven't been ministered to for a long time and had felt emotionally heavy. During the time of prayer I felt a real releasing. I also felt affirmed by others and ultimately by God."

The full quote is in Bridge Builders' latest annual report which can be found in your conference pack. You will detect that I went beyond what you might understand as a traditional mediator's role. And although this lady was grateful to me and my co-mediator, I am clear that – as is always the case with reconciliation – it was the work of God's Spirit which brought about the transformation for her and others in the group, and we as the mediators were simply channels to help this happen.

Challenge No. 3: Being Realistic and Recognising the Limits of Mediation

While I am convinced that we should use and promote mediation more in the church, my third challenge is to be realistic, and to recognise the limits of mediation. As I know from my early experience, it is possible to get so excited about mediation that you see it as the answer to all the conflicts that we face. But after nearly nine years of working as a mediator, I have learnt that there are definite limits. In my experience, factors affecting the possibility of "success" in church mediation include the following:

- the level of intensity that the conflict has reached;
- the level of maturity of the disputants;
- whether the relationship got off to a bad start at the outset, or whether it had any sustained period of working well in the past; and
- how long the situation has dragged on with a low level of trust.

As an illustration, I think back to a case between two ministers of a very large church. They had worked alongside one another for at least a dozen years. They had experienced a big breakdown in trust five or six years previously, but

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had carried on working together. Now they were facing crisis again. After initial interviews with each of them, I was very doubtful that anything could be retrieved. However, there was a commitment to try mediation, so we moved ahead. In the second session a major shift happened in the dynamics between the two men. This shift came as they talked about the personal impact on each of them of the crucial incident five or six years before. Some level of deeper recognition occurred between them, and we were able to move beyond the open antagonism they had started with, and begin some creative problem-solving.

After two further sessions we had a detailed four-page agreement, covering various items which they had both agreed to. Then, as we came to finalise the document, and look at them both signing it, they got stuck on one word. We hit deadlock, and the situation spiralled down again. Of course, the problem was not the one word they could not agree on. The problem was that over the course of four mediation sessions, we were not able to restore the trust that had broken down over five or six years. No agreement was signed, and at one level you could call the mediation a failure.

However, three significant things had happened:

- first, the two men developed a deeper understanding and mutual respect for one another through the mediated dialogue;
- second, the junior of the two ministers pulled back from taking action to try to publicly disgrace the senior minister, in a way which would have damaged and probably split the wider church body; and
- third, the senior minister reached the positive discernment that it was time for him to move on from ministry at this particular church, and was willing to share this in confidence with the junior man.

What they ended up with, therefore, was rather like a respectful divorce – done in a way which had a much less damaging impact on the church body than might have happened otherwise. So we need to be realistic: sometimes trust has been so damaged that a respectful separation is the best that can be achieved.

Let me offer one other caution, particularly about the use of interpersonal mediation. I can illustrate this with a request for mediation that came in just last week. The call came from an overseeing minister who had chaired a meeting the previous week between the minister of a local congregation, a woman whom I'll call Beryl, and a group of complainants who were unhappy with her leadership – or lack of leadership as they perceive it. The group of complainants is led by a retired minister I'll call George. Now, a novice might think that it would be good to try to mediate between the minister, Beryl, and the group of complainants led by George. However, some probing questions revealed five elements of the situation which begin to suggest a different course.

[*As this case is still live, and has not been through a reconciliation process, the details are withheld from the version published on the website.*]

My initial assessment therefore is that a congregational consultancy process is likely to be more appropriate than interpersonal mediation between Beryl and

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the complainants. This process would be designed to flag up some of the systemic problems contributing to the tension, to explore ways to strengthen and empower people and voices beyond the complainants, [*phrase deleted from website version, for the reason given above*], and it could enable Beryl and the lay leaders to address any genuine concerns about the leadership that the church needs.

I think this example shows the need to take a systemic view of conflicts in the church, and not to assume too readily that interpersonal mediation is what is needed.

Some Challenges for Bridge Builders

Before I conclude I want to mention briefly some of the challenges that I see facing Bridge Builders as we journey with you on the road ahead.

First, we need to ensure that our training of church leaders fits their needs. A recent survey of past participants in our five-day mediation and facilitation skills course confirmed what I had picked up anecdotally over the years: that most of those attending our training do not go on to lead formal mediation processes, but instead are using their new skills in everyday ministry, in chairing meetings and sometimes in informal mediation. We are therefore looking at separating out training in formal mediation process from our skills training in working with conflict and facilitating group process, while retaining a central focus on developing greater personal self-awareness.

Second, we need to ensure that we have effective ways to provide support for those who do take on more formal mediation and consultancy cases. We already provide such support for people in our Network on request. But as the number of mediation cases increases, as I predict that it will, it is likely that there will be a need for some broader mentoring or support for novices in the field from those with greater experience.

Third, I think we will need to explore how to provide some sort of accreditation or validation scheme for church mediators. This is a challenging area, which will involve some major work. But I anticipate that accreditation will become more of an issue as mediation becomes a more established way of addressing conflicts within our churches.

Conclusion

So I have offered three challenges for our churches as we think about the use of mediation.

First, is the challenge to change the culture of how our churches think about and engage with conflict, and the need to build a culture of active peace-making in the church.

Second, is the challenge to promote and resource mediation as one way of dealing with conflict, because mediation can offer a route through the tangled

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thickets that we can get caught up in. So there is a need to educate and train people at all levels of the church in appropriate skills and understanding.

Third, is the challenge to be realistic about mediation, and to recognise its limits. This includes the need to take a more systemic view of the conflicts that arise, and the need to develop assessment methods for discerning what type of intervention is worth risking.

At the heart of all these challenges is a question about our vision of the Church, and of the love of God. My conviction is that God wants to show his love for the world, and part of his vision for humanity, through the Church. Not that He is limited to or by the Church, thankfully. But in his work of reconciling the world to Himself, God has entrusted us with a message which we have to live out in the Church if we are to have anything meaningful to proclaim to His world. Incredible as it may seem, the Church is called to be a model to the world of what reconciliation means, and an illustration that peace can be made between people who are different and divided and struggling for power. We are called to live out a new reality in practical ways in our Christian communities, with the certain knowledge of the Holy Spirit's help.

I conclude with the words of Robert Warren in his book *Being Human, Being Church*:

> A church where there is no conflict has little relevance to our society. A church that has found a way to handle conflict creatively will be good news to all around it and in it. … There is a longing to see … the truth of God's call to love being practised. Conflicts in the church can seem such a distraction from getting on with the real work; *but this is the real work*. When people come near such a community they will instinctively know how real the relationships are.[1]

[1] Warren, R. *Being Human, Being Church: Spirituality and Mission in the Local Church* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995) 15-18. His emphasis.

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